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NEWS — 2026 TOWN ELECTIONS

With override rejected, Winchester shifts from campaigning to budget planning

WILL DOWD | STAFF WRITER

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Supporters of Winchester's failed Proposition 2½ override campaign wave signs outside a polling place on Election Day, March 21. In the aftermath of the $11.5 million defeat, town officials are weighing budget adjustments and next steps. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO / PETER CASEY

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After Winchester voters rejected an $11.5 million Proposition 2 1 on Election Day, March 21, the governing question in town has shifted

from persuasion to arithmetic.

Select Board member Bill McGonigle, who served on the Yes for Winchester campaign, said the defeat has changed how he approaches every budget conversation going forward.

“Right now, what it tells me is I cannot rely on this town ever passing an override,” McGonigle told the Winchester News in a telephone interview on March 23. “And that means we have to start taking immediate action to build a budget that can survive growing at no more than 2 1/2%.”

The override failed by a vote of 2,558 to 2,265, with five of eight precincts voting no. Turnout was about 32%, with 4,876 of the town’s 15,115 registered voters casting ballots.

The plan, developed over months by the State of the Town Committee, was designed to address a structural deficit affecting both school and municipal operations.

McGonigle, a trial lawyer, did not dwell on the loss itself. He framed it as a data point, not a mandate.

“I don’t think that there’s one blanket read of these results,” he said. “It was less than 300 votes, and there were approximately 10,000 people who didn’t even vote. So taking this as any sort of gospel mandate — it is one vote at one point in time.”

But even a narrow defeat, he said, changes the math. The town’s budget has historically grown faster than the 2.5% annual cap that Proposition 2 1/2 imposes on property tax increases. Without an override to close the gap, McGonigle said cuts will compound year after year.

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"Even if we do our damnedest to keep the budget below 2 1/2% per year, that is not going to necessarily keep pace with inflation," he said. "The government will get smaller and smaller. The services will get less and less. And people will get less and less."

He pointed to specific consequences already taking shape. Between now and the fall, he said, there will be layoffs — 30 to 40 on the school side, by his estimate, with additional cuts on the municipal side.

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The Select Board will look at raising transfer station fees and other charges. Health insurance benefits for town employees and retirees are also on the table.

"We just can't afford what we have right now," McGonigle said. "We're gonna have to make things, some things more expensive, and take some benefits away from people. That's the math."

He attributed the loss not to a failure of effort but to what he called tax exhaustion and real affordability concerns. He said he was not confident a smaller number would have changed the outcome and noted that any reduced override would have required the town to return to voters within a year or two.

McGonigle said the Select Board will most likely weigh whether to place a new override question on the November state election ballot. The deadline for that would fall roughly 120 days before the election, giving officials about 100 days to decide how to structure and present the question.

He said the State of the Town Committee's research would carry o

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"The great thing about the State of the Town work is so much of the work is already done," he said. "You just gotta get up and get back at it. It didn't work this time. Maybe change the strategy."

Norah Cooney, who led the Yes for Winchester campaign, said in a statement that the result showed the campaign had more work to do in explaining the plan's long-term value.

"This is not a case of waste or mismanagement — far from it — and it's not an issue that is unique to Winchester," Cooney said. "Proposition 2 1/2 is hamstringing cities and towns all across Massachusetts and it has to change."

School Committee member Stefanie Mnayarji, speaking in a personal capacity, offered a blunter assessment.

"I'm saddened and disappointed," Mnayarji said. "Contrary to what some read on Facebook, this loss and the cuts that now have to be made are going to hurt cost burdened, struggling families most."

McGonigle said the override's failure will force difficult trade-offs in the schools.

"They now have to decide what do they value more, keeping teachers or instituting a literacy curriculum, because there's going to be a trade off," McGonigle said.

School officials may also have to consider redistricting and consolidating elementary schools, he added.

Asked what he wanted residents to understand about what comes next, McGonigle kept it short.

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"The Select Board is going to continue to work as hard as it did to figure out this override question," he said, "and we're going to take what they give us and do everything we can with it."

Will Dowd is a Massachusetts journalist who covers municipal government and community life for Winchester News. He runs The Marblehead Independent, a reader-funded digital newsroom.

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Winchester News reviewed precinct-level election results from every annual town election since 2014 — 13 years of data covering turnout, ballot questions, Select Board races, School Committee contests and Planning Board results — and compared them against the March 21 preliminary numbers. The 2026 results have not yet been certified by Town

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Third No Kings Rally for Winchester, Medford area set for March 28

Winchester will hold its third No Kings rally this weekend and include a new addition to its program – a community walk toward town before the rally. Organizers of Winchester's third No Kings rally hope to draw in more than 1,000 people to the March 28 event. Other rallies

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Justice turns 35 this spring! There will be a celebration on Saturday, April 11, from 7-9:30 p.m., at the Sons of Italy, 117 Swanton St., Winchester. Connect with your local friends and neighbors as

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Saturday, March 28, join the community at Winchester Community Music School, 407 Highland Ave., for a Jazz Jam Session, an afternoon of fun, spontaneous jazz playing, beginning at 3 p.m. Instrumentalists and vocalists of all skill levels are

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